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ABSTRACT

This paper reports the results of a mailed survey of beginning and mentor teachers who participated in the Wisconsin-Whitewater Beginning Teacher Assistance Program (BTAP) between 1988 and 1999, a university-based mentoring program for K-12 teachers. The program features graduate credit for required mentor training and beginning teacher participation; monthly meetings of participants; required conferences and classroom observations; visits to school sites by university personnel; and support for professional development activities or acquisition of professional materials. The survey asked about program features and the impact of program participation on respondents' professional development. Results indicate that the BTAP is relatively successful in serving the needs of beginning teachers and their mentors. Several aspects of the program were viewed favorably by some and negatively by others. Both groups appreciated being able to earn graduate credit as part of program participation, and they believed participation in BTAP was more valuable than participation in many other professional development activities. Teachers valued the opportunity to interact with each other in a professional context. One of the most universal challenges faced by mentors and their proteges was limited time for mentoring. (SM)

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Evaluating a University Mentoring Program for K-12 Teachers: The University of Wisconsin-Whitewater *Beginning Teacher Assistance Program*

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This paper was prepared for presentation at the Diversity in Mentoring Conference of the International Mentoring Association, New Orleans, Louisiana, March 31, 2000.

Description: The University of Wisconsin-Whitewater ***Beginning Teacher Assistance Program*** has operated since 1974 and is among the oldest university-based mentoring programs for K-12 teachers in the United States. This paper presents the results of a survey of program participants from 1988 to 1999 regarding key program features and the impact of participation on their professional development.

Reactions to this paper are invited by the author:

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Evaluating a University Mentoring Program for K-12 Teachers: The University of Wisconsin-Whitewater Beginning Teacher Assistance Program

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Interest in mentoring and mentor programs has never been greater than it is today (Fideler & Haselkorn, 1999; Ganser, 2000; George Lucas Foundation, 1999; National Foundation for the Improvement of Teaching, 1999; Scherer, 1999). According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (1999), 58% of teachers with three or fewer years of experience report being mentored by another teacher in a formal relationship. Furthermore, mentor programs are sponsored by many different organizations, including schools and school districts, colleges and universities, consortia of schools, service agencies (e.g., Cooperative Educational Service Agencies in Wisconsin), and teacher associations.

The University of Wisconsin-Whitewater ***Beginning Teacher Assistance Program*** (BTAP) is offered as a service to area school districts that participate voluntarily. It has been in operation since 1974 and has served 301 beginning teachers and 295 mentor in 24 school districts in southern Wisconsin. Central features of the program include graduate credit for required mentor training and beginning teacher participation, monthly meetings of participants (held on campus, 4:30 to 7:00 p.m. and 8:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. in September and April), required conferences and classroom observations, visits to school sites by university personnel, and support for professional development activities or the acquisition of professional materials. In Wisconsin, organized mentoring exists in a variety of formats (Ganser & Koskela, 1997), but is not mandated. This will change on July 1, 2004, with the implementation of a new system of teacher

licensing that includes requiring school districts to assign qualified, trained mentors to all teachers issued an "Initial Educator" license (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2000).

This paper reports the results of a mailed survey (and second survey for non-respondents) of 173 beginning teachers and 167 who participated in the BTAP between 1988 and 1999. Participants for 1988-96 were surveyed in December 1996; participants for 1996-97, 1997-98, and 1998-99 were surveyed in 1997, 1998, and 1999 respectively. The response rate was 72 for the beginning teachers, or 41.6%, and 82 for the mentors, or 49.6%. The survey consisted of 23 items using a seven-point likert-type scale. The results of these items were analyzed using the Statistical Analysis System (SAS) and they are displayed in Tables One, Two, and Three. The survey also included three open-ended questions regarding benefits and weaknesses of program participation, and other comments. Table Four displays the number of respondents and the number of discrete items for each of these there open-ended questions. The responses to open-ended items were analyzed for emerging categories.

Findings

Likert-scale Items

The first eight survey items focused on basic program features of the BTAP and the results are displayed in Table One. Among the items rated by both beginning teachers and mentors, the highest value (6.31) was ascribed to earning graduate credits as part of program participation, although this item was rated considerably higher by the beginning teachers than it was by the mentors ($p < .05$). In fact, as a separate group, the beginning teacher rated the value of earning graduate credits (6.62) higher than they did the value of having a mentor (6.29). In contrast, the combined groups ascribed the lowest value (4.86) to visits

once each semester to beginning teacher/mentor teams at their school site for the purpose of monitoring progress. Among the items completed only by the beginning teachers, a relatively low rating (4.71) was ascribed to the value of completing the Professional Development Journal, required of the beginning teachers but not of the mentors. The mentors rated the value of having served as a mentor (6.48) higher than any of the other items in this section of the survey for mentors or beginning teachers.

Items 9 to 15 focused on comparing participation in the BTAP to other common forms of staff or professional development. As a group, all the respondents rated participation in the BTAP as having more value than the other activities described. The greatest value (5.30) was in comparison to school or district sponsored inservice workshops, though the difference in the rating of this item between the beginning teachers (5.44) and the mentors (5.16) was considerable. The least value (4.84) was ascribed to the BTAP in comparison to workshops sponsored by groups other than schools or school districts.

There were some differences among the beginning teachers and mentors as separate groups. The beginning teachers rated participation in the BTAP as more valuable in comparison to school or district inservice workshops (5.44), but less so when the comparison is to serving as a cooperating teacher for early field experience students (4.52) or for student teachers or interns (4.46). The mentors ascribed more value in participating in the BTAP in comparison to participating in workshop sponsored by groups other than the school or district (4.78), but even more value when compared to serving as a cooperating teacher (5.27) or independent reading of professional books and journals (5.30).

Items 17 to 23 focused on the overall impact of the BTAP on the participants and the results are displayed in Table Three. The respondents rated participation in the BTAP as valuable both

professionally (6.24) and personally (6.16). However, the mentors' ratings for these two items was higher (6.24 and 6.16, respectively) than the ratings of the beginning teachers (6.08 for both items). The beginning teachers agreed (5.97) that their experiences as a beginning teacher were more positive due to participation in the BTAP. Both beginning teachers (5.67) and mentors (5.96) indicated that they believed they are better teachers as a result of taking part in this program. Among this group of items, both beginning teachers (4.31) and mentors (4.81) suggested at least some tendency to assume a leadership role in their school or district regarding assistance provided to beginning teachers.

Open-ended Items

Benefits.

As displayed in Table Four, respondents quite readily described their perceptions regarding the benefits the BTAP (288 comments). With respect to benefits, among the beginning teachers, three areas accounted for 54.1% of their comments: (1) access to an experienced teacher serving as a mentor (n = 32, 21.6%), (2) opportunities to meet with other beginning teachers (n = 26, 17.6%), and (3) validation that their individual struggles and anxieties were shared by other beginning teachers as well (n = 22, 14.9%). Several dimensions of the program accounted for 34 comments, or 23% of all comments, especially the Professional Development Journal (n = 9), meeting topics and guest speakers (n = 5), and opportunity to earn graduate credit (n = 5).

Among the mentors, three areas of benefits accounted for 58.6% of their comments: (1) satisfactory experience in working with a beginning teacher (n = 36, 25.7%), (2) reflection regarding teaching philosophy, methodology, etc. (n = 25, 17.9%), and (3) learning new ideas and self-improvement (n = 21, 15.0%). Comments regarding the benefits of participation in the BTAP in

terms of rejuvenation, sense of professionalism, and self-validation also figured prominently in the mentors' comments (n = 18, 12.9%), as did opportunities to meet teachers from other school districts (n = 15, 10.7%). Comparable to the beginning teachers' references to their Professional Development Journal were the mentors' references to aspects of their mentor training, including assigned readings, systematic observation of teaching, analysis of effective instruction, and coaching (n = 7). One mentor also linked participation in the BTAP with increased skill as a cooperating teacher for student teachers.

Weaknesses.

As displayed in Table Four, respondents gave far fewer negative comments (148) than positive ones (288). Among the beginning teachers, negative comments about the monthly BTAP meetings dominated: (1) general nature of the meetings (n = 32, 45.7%), (2) schedule of meetings (n = 10, 14.3%, and (3) meeting location (n = 8; 11.4%). With respect to the general nature of the meetings, the most common criticisms were poor presenters (n = 10) and presentations that were not geared to the specific teaching assignment of the respondent (n = 5). Problems with the schedule of the meetings include being held too frequently (n = 1), not often enough (n = 3), and interfering with coaching (n = 1) or enrollment in other courses (n = 1). In terms of meeting locations, beginning teachers cited distance and travel time to campus (n = 5) and they recommended holding more meetings at school sites (n = 3). Some negative comments also focused on the Professional Development Journal (n = 10, 14.3%), especially with respect to the assigned topics and the time required. Twenty of the beginning teachers reported limited time or the poor use of time; more specifically, their concerns focused on travel time to campus, the time involved in the meetings, the time required to complete the Professional Development Journal, and limited time to meet with mentors. Finally, three of the beginning teachers

commented that their mentor was not helpful or lacked enthusiasm and commitment.

The most common weaknesses cited by the mentors focused on the lack of available time for mentoring (n = 33, 42.3%), including the time to work with beginning teachers in schools regularly (n = 13). Most commonly, the problems with time were undefined as just not having enough of it (n = 13). Mentors also criticized several aspects of the monthly meetings (n = 13, 16.7%), including weak content for some presentations and not being worth the time spent at them. They also cited several negative dimensions to the BTAP in general (n = 10, 12.8%), including dissatisfaction at having teachers from several districts present, each with different needs and priorities. In particular, a negative comment about the incompatibility of school districts represented one year suggested that the needs of beginning teachers and mentors from a large, urban school district were very different from those of teachers in smaller, rural districts. One commented focused on the lack of systematic following up during the year following district participation. Finally, the mentors cited some weaknesses with respect to mentor role and responsibilities (n = 8, 10.3%), including lack of meaningful mentor training and poor selection of mentors.

Other comments.

Most of the other comments offered by the beginning teachers (n = 31, 91.2%) focused on various dimensions of the program and were generally very favorable, although one beginning teacher summarized participation in the program as a waste of time and energy and another judge the program to be most helpful for teachers needing reassurance. Most of mentors' additional comments, generally favorable, referred to general dimensions of the program (n = 21, 67.7%), although one mentor indicated that the BTAP would be more valuable if it were tailored to the needs of specific districts and two recommended that more care be

exercised in selecting mentors.

Conclusion

In the expanding universe of mentor programs for K-12 teachers, the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater ***Beginning Teacher Assistance Program*** offers an approach to structured mentoring intended for small school districts where the number of beginning teachers may not be large enough to support a structured program that has a "identity" necessary for its long-term acceptance and support. The results of the survey suggest that the BTAP is relatively successful in serving the needs of beginning teachers and their mentors. Not surprisingly, several aspects of the program that are viewed favorably by some participants are viewed negatively by other participants, e.g., the beginning teachers' Professional Development Journal and the content and organization of monthly meetings.

The results of the survey highlight one of the most universal challenges faced by mentors and their protégés: limited time for mentoring, whether it is at the school or at a mentor program meeting.. When all is said and done, the most essential feature of mentoring, regardless of other details, is contact between mentor and mentee: face-to-face, written messages, voice mail, e-mail, etc. Everything else, including classroom observations and attending activities together, is of secondary importance. Put another way, mentoring really does not exist without regular, sustained contact between mentor and mentee for a variety of purposes, including clarifying procedural matters, providing support and encouragement, and promoting the development of the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that are associated with effective teaching and ultimately with student achievement.

The results of this survey also indicate how very much teachers value the opportunity to interact with each other in a professional context. The survey respondents communicated that

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they very much appreciated the program's on-going opportunities for them simply to share their day-to-day experiences with one another, on the one hand, but, more importantly, to explore strategies for becoming a more effective teacher, on the other hand. In this regard, the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater ***Beginning Teacher Assistance Program*** serves both beginning and experienced teachers by offsetting the professional isolation which they too often face.

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TABLE ONE

Prompt: **Please indicate how valuable you found each of the following aspects of this program by circling the appropriate number on the scale.**

Scale: **7 = Valuable 1 = Not Valuable**

		ALL RESPONDENTS			BEGINNING TCHS			MENTOR TEACHERS		
		N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD
1-BT	Having an experienced teacher to serve as my mentor.	-	-	-	72	6.29	1.29	-	-	-
1-MT	Having served as a mentor for a beginning teacher.	-	-	-	-	-	-	82	6.48	0.79
* 2.	The monthly program meetings.	154	5.34	1.26	72	5.13	1.22	82	5.52	1.27
3-BT	Meeting with other beginning teachers.	-	-	-	72	6.13	1.03	-	-	-
3-MT	Meeting with other mentor teachers.	-	-	-	-	-	-	82	5.98	1.22
4.	Meeting with teachers from my own school district.	149	5.67	1.20	70	5.76	1.03	79	5.59	1.34
5.	Meeting with teachers from other school districts.	154	5.62	1.17	72	5.46	1.09	82	5.77	1.22
6.	Having someone from UW-Whitewater visit me in my school.	148	4.86	1.52	70	4.67	1.50	78	5.04	1.52
7-BT	Completing my Professional Development Journal.	-	-	-	72	4.71	1.61	-	-	-
7-MT	Having had preparation/training for being a mentor.	-	-	-	-	-	-	81	6.12	1.27
* 8.	Earning graduate credits as part of this program.	1.51	6.31	1.28	71	6.62	0.74	80	6.04	1.57

Note: BT = item for Beginning Teachers MT = item for Mentor Teachers
* $p < .05$

TABLE TWO

Prompt: **Indicate how valuable you found your participation in this program to be as a professional development activity *IN COMPARISON* TO other professional development activities by circling the appropriate number on the scale.**

Scale: **7 = MORE Valuable** **1 = LESS Valuable**

		ALL RESPONDENTS			BEGINNING TCHS			MENTOR TEACHERS		
		N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD
9.	School or district sponsored inservice workshops, etc.	152	5.30	1.37	72	5.44	1.29	80	5.16	1.43
10.	Workshops sponsored by other groups	146	4.84	1.12	68	4.90	1.05	78	4.78	1.18
11.	College or university graduate courses	145	5.07	1.31	65	5.06	1.30	80	5.08	1.33
12.	Independent reading of professional books, journals, etc.	149	5.19	1.40	68	5.06	1.49	81	5.30	1.33
13.	Serving on school or district committees, task forces, etc.	143	4.90	1.33	63	4.86	1.39	80	4.94	1.30
14.	Serving as a cooperating teacher for an early field experience student (prior to student teaching)	91	4.89	1.45	31	4.52	1.61	60	5.08	1.33
15.	Serving as a cooperating teacher for a student teacher or intern	86	5.05	1.58	24	4.46	1.86	62	5.27	1.40

TABLE THREE

Prompt: **Please indicate how strongly you agree with each of the following statements by circling the appropriate number on the scale.**

Scale: 7 = Agree 1 = Disagree	**ALL RESPONDENTS**			**BEGINNING TCHS**			**MENTOR TEACHERS**		
	N	**Mean**	**SD**	**N**	**Mean**	**SD**	**N**	**Mean**	**SD**
17. Participating in this program was a valuable PROFESSIONAL experience for me.	152	6.24	1.08	72	6.08	1.03	80	6.38	1.11
18. Participating in this program was a valuable PERSONAL experience for me.	152	6.16	1.15	72	6.08	1.14	80	6.23	1.17
19-BT My experiences as a beginning teacher were more positive because of my participation in this program.	-	-	-	72	5.97	1.09	-	-	-
19-MT The benefits I experienced as a mentor in this program outweighed the costs (e.g., time, energy).	-	-	-	-	-	-	80	5.95	1.36
20. As a result of participating in this program, I have assumed a formal or informal leadership role in my school or school district regarding the kind or quality of assistance provided to beginning teachers and/or any school- or district-based mentoring program.	147	4.57	1.74	70	4.31	1.74	77	4.81	1.72
21. As a result of participating in this program, I am a better teacher today.	150	5.82	1.14	72	5.67	1.22	78	5.96	1.05
22. I would recommend that beginning teachers participate in this program.	152	6.43	1.15	72	6.25	1.23	80	6.60	1.05
23. I would recommend that UW-Whitewater continue To offer this program to area school districts.	152	6.51	1.07	72	6.44	1.06	80	6.58	1.08

Note: BT = item for Beginning Teachers MT = item for Mentor Teachers

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TABLE FOUR

Prompt	BEGINNING TEACHERS N	Percent	Items	MENTORS N	Percent	Items
1. As you reflect on your experiences as a mentor teacher/ beginning teacher participating in his program, what were two or three of the **BENEFITS** in the program for you?	65	90.3	148	63	76.8	140
2. What were two or three of the **WEAKNESSES** of the program for you?	49	68.1	70	54	65.9	78
3. Other comments or reflections about your participation in this program.	28	38.9	34	28	34.1	31
TOTAL			252			249

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